

**Policy Polarisation in Italy: The Short and Conflictual Life of the ‘Government of Change’  
(2018-2019)**

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**Abstract**

This paper uses the concept of policy polarisation to understand the short and conflictual life of the Conte I cabinet which remained in office in Italy from June 2018 to September 2019. We show how policy polarisation in parliament and between coalition parties shaped the formation and termination of the so-called ‘government of change’. When investigating the implementation of the government agenda, we also assess the role of the coalition contract as an (ineffective) institutional solution to problems stemming from policy divisions between the Five Star Movement and the Lega. We argue that, despite some policy accomplishments of the government, the Five Star Movement-Lega coalition appears more as a temporary experiment, whose legacy may not represent a new course of action.

**Keywords:** Government coalition, Government agenda, Populism, Coalition agreement, Party manifestos, Parliamentary questions, Five Star Movement, Lega

Policy polarisation is a crucial factor influencing the entire life cycle of governments in contemporary democracies. It is not only a key aspect of party competition during the electoral campaign (Downs 1957; Sartori 1976). As the comparative literature has pointed out, polarisation which sets the two sides of the party system at polar opposites can also increase the complexity of the bargaining environment after the elections, thus delaying the formation of governments and affecting the type of cabinets eventually formed. In addition, stark policy divisions between parties can undermine the stability of cabinets and favour their termination (Strøm, Müller & Bergman 2008). Marked policy divergence between parties can affect parliamentary business and day-to-day policymaking as well (Martin & Vanberg 2011). Like in other South European countries, polarisation has been substantially reshaping the party system in Italy, with serious consequences for the governments recently formed in the country. For this reason, the concept of policy polarisation – here mostly conceived as intense programmatic differentiation between parties – can be particularly helpful to understand the life of the Conte I cabinet, which ruled Italy for slightly more than one year following the 2018 elections.

The general elections of 4 March 2018 marked the umpteenth turning point in the evolution of the Italian political system, resulting in a hung parliament and leading to the formation of a ‘populist’ cabinet after three months of negotiations (Chiaromonte et al. 2018). In a comparative perspective, this outcome seems to fit well into longer and more general patterns of political instability and restructuring of party systems in Southern and the rest of Europe, especially as a consequence of the Great Recession (Bosco & Verney 2012, 2016; Hernández & Kriesi 2016; Hooghe & Marks 2018). However, the executive that formed in Italy in June 2018 – the so-called

‘yellow-green’ government<sup>1</sup> – was peculiar in many respects. The cabinet, which was described as one of the few fully populist governments in post-war Western Europe, was indeed an unprecedented coalition between two anti-establishment parties: the M5S (*Movimento 5 stelle* – Five Star Movement), which until then had been outside the mainstream of the Italian party system (Tronconi 2018), and the *Lega* (League), which had stayed out of the governing game since the most acute phase of the Great Recession (Tarchi 2018). To mark discontinuity with the party system and policy dynamics which had characterised Italian political life since the mid-1990s, the leaders of the M5S and the Lega – Luigi di Maio and Matteo Salvini, respectively – chose the non-partisan outsider Giuseppe Conte as Prime Minister (PM) and pompously dubbed the new cabinet as the ‘government of change’.

The Conte I cabinet was then supposed to enact radical reforms in several policy areas. In spite of the declared intentions of the governmental leaders, however, the programmatic divergences – or polarisation – between the M5S and the Lega in the crucial areas of fiscal policy and welfare made the life of the yellow-green cabinet a true puzzle. This is because, during the electoral campaign, the M5S pledged to implement major redistributive programmes through a universal scheme of basic income, while the Lega promised tax cuts in the form of a flat tax rate on income. Especially given the strict EU budget constraints on Italy, these two policy strategies were judged as incompatible by most observers. The partners of this ‘uneasy’ coalition tried to reconcile the policy divergences between them by means of a formal coalition agreement – a true novelty in Italy’s political life. This post-electoral ‘contract’ was supposed to ensure peaceful relations within the coalition, ease the implementation of the government’s agenda, and make the

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<sup>1</sup> In Italy, yellow is the colour used to represent the Five Star Movement and green is the colour used to represent the Lega (with Lega politicians making public appearances often identifying themselves by wearing green ties or rosettes).

executive more durable. However, it did not prevent polarisation between the coalition parties emerging during daily policymaking, nor did it avoid early cabinet termination.

This paper investigates the impact of polarisation by analysing the formation and life of the Conte I government, as well as the implementation of its policy agenda. We conceive of polarisation as head-on confrontation on policy among political parties – a phenomenon that can be captured by looking at the distribution of party positions along the main policy dimensions structuring party competition. While scholars like Dalton (2008) measure the degree of polarisation in the party system focusing on the dispersion of parties along the general left-right dimension, we assess polarisation in the Italian party system by looking at how parties are distributed on specific policy issues. In our analysis, we also pay specific attention to the role of the coalition contract as a possible institutional solution to the problems stemming from the policy divisions between the M5S and the Lega.

The paper is organised as follows. The next section shows how polarisation in the Italian party system shaped the outcomes of the government formation process in 2018. Focusing on government agenda, the third section examines how the M5S and the Lega used a coalition agreement as an instrument to accommodate their policy differences. The two ensuing sections analyse the patterns of policy-making observed under the yellow-green cabinet. More precisely, the fourth section discusses how the government agenda was implemented, while the fifth one illustrates how the M5S and the Lega used the legislative arena as a venue for signalling their own policy priorities to voters consistently with (and sometimes in spite of) the content of the coalition contract. The following section then discusses the dynamics leading to the termination of the yellow-green cabinet in August 2019 and the birth of a new government (Conte II) supported by a

different coalition. The final section offers an overall assessment of the M5S-Lega government in relation to polarisation in the Italian party system and more general patterns observed in Europe.

### **Party system polarisation and the formation of the Conte I government**

The Conte I government was formed in turbulent times. The 2018 vote did not produce any clear majority in the Italian parliament, just like the general elections held five years before that marked the end of the bi-polar party system which had characterised Italy since the mid-1990s. Three major poles emerged in 2013. The centre-left electoral coalition led by the PD (Partito Democratico – Democratic Party) gained about 30 per cent of the popular vote, which ensured it a majority of seats in the Chamber (thanks to a seat bonus) but not in the Senate. A slightly lower vote share was attained by the centre-right coalition, which was headed by Silvio Berlusconi's PDL (Popolo della Libertà – People of Freedom) and included the LN (Lega Nord – Northern League) and the far right FDI (Fratelli d'Italia – Brothers of Italy). Finally, in its first participation to a nationwide election, the Five Star Movement astonishingly obtained 25 per cent of the votes.

Thanks to its anti-elite rhetoric and euroscepticism, the M5S was able to channel Italian citizens' distrust and dissatisfaction towards existing parties and politicians (Bosco & Verney 2012). The M5S was also able to exploit the public discontent with the austerity measures implemented by Mario Monti's cabinet (2011-2013), as well as with Italy's high unemployment and lack of economic growth. After the Movement's refusal to take part in a government together with the PD, a 'grand coalition' cabinet was sworn in in April 2013, featuring Enrico Letta as PM and including PD, PDL and small centrist groups. Although all sharing pro-EU positions, the parties supporting the executive diverged on other policy issues (Di Virgilio et al. 2015). After only 10 months and the withdrawal of Berlusconi's party from the cabinet, a centre-left

government was formed (thanks to the support of a splinter group of PDL) with Matteo Renzi as PM (2014-2016), later replaced by Paolo Gentiloni (2016-2018).

Accounts of party competition in 2018 show that at election time, the Italian party system was especially polarised along non-economic policy dimensions. This is because very salient issues such as immigration and European integration proved to be crucial in structuring party competition in 2018 (Itanes 2018; D'Alimonte 2019). Non-economic dimensions like the two mentioned above also seemed to overlap substantially – i.e. more anti-immigration parties also tended to support reducing the range of areas where the EU can set policy, and vice versa (Giannetti, Pedrazzani & Pinto 2017, 2018). This may hint at the emergence of a ‘demarcation-integration’ axis of political competition in Italy, which would capture parties’ positions on the so-called ‘new cultural issues’ (Kriesi et al. 2012).

As to the electoral supply, the vote of March 2018 was contested by three main actors, none of which, according to the opinion polls, could reasonably expect to win a majority of parliamentary seats (Garzia 2018).<sup>2</sup> A centre-right cartel was created including Berlusconi’s FI (Forza Italia – Go Italy), the Lega (formerly Lega Nord), the right-wing FDI and small centrist groups. Although the Lega and FDI held more radical positions against immigration and the EU than their allies, all the parties in this bloc could be considered as conservative on non-economic issues and (more or less moderately) right-wing on the economy. Altogether, centre-right parties gained 37 per cent of the votes, with the Lega surpassing Berlusconi’s party for the first time in terms of votes.

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<sup>2</sup> According to many observers, some sort of grand coalition between PD and Berlusconi’s party was the most likely outcome after the elections. This (unpopular) outcome was also aired by all the other parties during the campaign as a way to mobilise votes (Chiaromonte et al. 2018).

Another electoral alliance was built around the PD and involved several minor lists, all of which shared pro-state positions in the economic field, pro-EU stances and progressive attitudes on non-economic issues. This cartel obtained 23 per cent of the votes – that is, just a few percentage points more than the PD list alone. The third major contender in the 2018 vote was the M5S, which ran alone just as it had done five years before, winning one-third of the votes. Headed by Luigi Di Maio, the M5S conducted a relatively eurosceptic electoral campaign (in the past it has voiced much stronger opposition to the EU and particularly to the Euro, see Conti, Marangoni & Verzichelli 2020) while holding ambiguous positions on the economy (that is, on pro-state/pro-market ideas) and on immigration (Mosca & Tronconi 2019). Besides these three main actors, the 2018 election was also contested by LEU (Liberi e Uguali – Free and Equal), a left-wing party which broadly supported European integration and policies designed to help immigrants.

The policy positions of the main Italian parties participating in the 2018 elections are reported in Table 1. The scores in this table, which are drawn from Giannetti, Pedrazzani and Pinto's (2018) expert survey, cover the three main dimensions of competition according to expert judgements – European integration, immigration and taxes vs spending – to which we added other two relevant domains – civil rights and environment. To put it simply, there seemed to be two broad clusters of parties in the Italian elections of March 2018. One cluster grouped economically leftist parties, which also took pro-EU stances and liberal positions on immigration (PD and LEU). Another cluster included all the parties belonging to the centre-right cartel (Lega, FI and FDI), which shared pro-market stances and eurosceptic and anti-immigration views. The M5S belonged to this second cluster: although closer to centre-left parties on the (relatively less salient) economic dimension, the Movement was closer to the centre-right camp in the most relevant domains of Europe and immigration.

As mentioned above, we consider polarisation as the dispersion of parties' policy positions in a party system. A high degree of polarisation then indicates policy divergences that imply strong confrontation and hostility between parties. We measure polarisation in each of the policy domains considered by Giannetti, Pedrazzani and Pinto's (2018) expert survey using the Dalton's (2008) index. This widely used index takes into account how party positions are distributed along a given policy domain as well as the party size. In particular, after rescaling the party scores provided by Giannetti, Pedrazzani and Pinto, for each policy dimension we calculated the Dalton's polarisation index as  $\sqrt{\sum(s_i) \times \left(\frac{p_i - \bar{p}}{5}\right)^2}$ . In this formula,  $s_i$  is the seat share of party  $i$ ,  $p_i$  is party  $i$ 's position on a given dimension, and  $\bar{p}$  is the mean of the party positions.

Dalton's polarisation index ranges from 0 (when all the parties occupy the same position on a given scale) to 10 (when all the parties are split between the two extremes of the scale). We found that, in 2018, the Italian party system was much more polarised along non-economic dimensions, such as immigration and European integration (polarisation equals 5.1 and 4.7, respectively), than on the taxes vs spending scale (polarisation equals 2.8).

It was in this polarised context that the 'government of change' came into being. In particular, the formation of the Conte I executive can be understood in light of the closeness of the M5S (the largest party) and the Lega (the other 'winner' of the 2018 election) on particularly salient non-economic policy dimensions such as Europe and immigration, and their distance from the PD in the same domains. The M5S and the Lega were able to coalesce around these dividing lines – a pattern that was reinforced by the anti-establishment or 'populist' rhetoric shared by the two parties. The M5S was certainly closer to the PD than to the Lega on the economic dimension, as well as on other issues such as civil rights and environment. However, these domains were not the most salient ones in the 2018 elections. According to Giannetti, Pedrazzani and Pinto's (2018)

expert survey data, the two most salient dimensions in 2018 were European integration and immigration (with salience scores of 15.4 and 15.1, respectively, on a 1-20 salience scale). The third dimension in terms of salience (13.9) was taxes vs spending. The salience score for civil rights and environment was even lower (11.5 and 10.5, respectively). Notably, the M5S-Lega cabinet could form when the M5S abandoned their hitherto uncompromising opposition towards entering any coalition, and only after the Lega decided to break up the centre-right electoral alliance and search for possible coalition partners outside of it.

The formation of the yellow-green government took quite a long time, as three months passed from the elections of 4 March to 1 June 2018, the day when Conte took the oath of office. During this period, the President of the Republic, Sergio Mattarella, played a crucial role in ‘masterminding’ the bargaining process (Valbruzzi 2018, p. 464). This is because in Italy the process of government formation is initiated by the President of the Republic, who nominates a *formateur* after holding consultations with the parliamentary party groups – a task that becomes more crucial when elections yield no clear winner as in 2018. According to the Italian Constitution, the President of the Republic finally appoints the PM and the ministers (based on a list of names proposed by the PM).

Five attempts to form a government took place, four of which turned out to be inconclusive (see Table 2). In a first attempt, on 18 April the President designated the Speaker of the Senate (Maria Alberti Casellati) as *informateur*, with the aim of seeking an agreement between the M5S and the centre-right electoral cartel. This attempt failed as the M5S refused to negotiate with FI due to the judicial scandals involving its leader Berlusconi. A few days later Mattarella charged the Speaker of the Chamber of Deputies (Roberto Fico) with the role of encouraging a M5S-PD coalition. Such an option proved unfeasible because the PD faction headed by the former secretary

Renzi rejected any agreement with the Movement.<sup>3</sup> A new bargaining round started on 9 May, involving the M5S and the Lega. In the following days, the two parties signed a coalition agreement known as the ‘Contract for the Government of Change’ and proposed Conte as PM. However, the negotiations were stopped by the President of the Republic, who rejected the list of ministers proposed by the designated PM due to the appointment of eurosceptic Paolo Savona to the Ministry of the Economy.

On 28 May, Mattarella then appointed the economist Carlo Cottarelli to form a technocratic government which would ask for support in parliament. Yet, as soon as the M5S and the Lega reached a new agreement on the nominees for ministerial portfolios – including a non-partisan expert as Minister of the Economy – Conte was appointed again on 31 May and his government was sworn in the day after. The yellow-green cabinet then received a confidence vote in the two houses (350 yes, 35 abstentions, and 236 nays in the Chamber; 171 yes, 25 abstentions and 117 nays in the Senate), where it was also supported by a small party representing the Italian diaspora (MAIE, Movimento Associativo Italiani all’Estero – Associative Movement Italians Abroad).

The ministerial composition of the Conte I cabinet was rather peculiar. The M5S and the Lega chose as PM a virtually unknown law professor without any previous political or parliamentary experience. His primary task seemed to be that of ensuring coordination between the two coalition partners. On the whole, ministerial portfolios were allocated in such a way as to enhance the role and visibility of the leaders of the two ruling parties (Marangoni & Verzichelli 2019). Both Di Maio and Salvini were not only appointed deputy PMs, but were also in charge of

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<sup>3</sup> The PD also opposed any agreement with the centre-right parties. Please also note that the PD-FI grand coalition put forth before the elections turned out to be unfeasible as the two parties together did not control a parliamentary majority.

prominent ministries (Labour and Economic Development for the former, Interior for the latter). In addition, the yellow-green cabinet had a strong technocratic connotation, as it featured the highest share of ‘technical’ ministers of all partisan governments formed in Italy (Valbruzzi 2018). Besides the premiership, five of the nineteen ministerial portfolios were given to non-partisan figures. Notably, two independents were appointed as the Ministers of Economy and Foreign Affairs (under pressure from Mattarella), as a way to ensure the credibility of Italy abroad and the country’s commitment to the EU.

### **The government agenda: managing polarisation by contract**

Moving from ministerial offices to policies, it can be argued that the two coalition parties were rather polarised in terms of economic and fiscal policy. This was particularly evident during the election campaign, when the M5S pledged to establish a universal basic income (‘citizens’ minimum guaranteed income’) while the Lega proposed a flat tax rate on income.<sup>4</sup> Implementing an extensively redistributive scheme and, at the same time, cutting taxes would certainly be hard for any government and especially for Italy considering the constraints on its budget dictated by the EU. However, as we mentioned above, the two parties had closer positions on a few salient issues other than the economy, such as defence of national sovereignty against the EU, and they shared the use of anti-establishment rhetoric. Mainly due to the programmatic differences between the M5S and the Lega, the yellow-green cabinet relied upon a formal coalition agreement as a basis for the government’s policy agenda. In this respect, Table 3 reports a selection of the most

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<sup>4</sup> In this regard, the Lega’s electoral pledges were similar to those of FI, which centred upon tax reduction. The citizens’ basic income promised by the M5S was instead closer to the schemes proposed by the PD, which included a monthly allowance for parents and welfare support for the poor.

important electoral pledges of the M5S and the Lega as well as the most relevant policy commitments in the coalition agreement.

The agreement subscribed to in 2018 by the M5S and the Lega represented a true novelty in Italian politics. Coalition pacts made their appearance in Italy during the 1990s (Verzichelli & Cotta 2000). However, the documents upon which the cabinets led by Romano Prodi (in 1996 and 2006) and Berlusconi (in 2001 and 2008) relied were simply the joint electoral manifestos that the winning electoral alliance had issued before the vote (Timmermans 2006; Müller & Strøm 2008; Moury 2013). These joint programmatic platforms were almost entirely devoted to policy issues, were not really formalised, and did not establish any specific mechanism for solving potential conflicts arising within the government (Cotta & Marangoni 2015). All things considered, they did not prove very effective as instruments for constraining ministerial discretion and promoting joint policy making within the coalition (Conti 2015).

In contrast, in 2018 for the first time in Italian republican history, the new executive was able to rely upon a formal post-electoral agreement. This contract was more similar to the coalition pacts that are common in countries like Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands. This is because the contract between the M5S and the Lega was a public document officially signed by the leaders of the two parties after the elections. Moreover, beyond including a list of policy priorities to guide government action, it also set up a formal instrument – the so-called ‘conciliation committee’ (*comitato di conciliazione*) – for handling possible divergences between the coalition partners. According to Santana Pereira and Moury (2018), the M5S-Lega contract can be regarded as an innovation not only because of its post-electoral nature, but also because it was written and signed after lengthy negotiations between two parties that were very distant from each other in ideological terms, in the attempt to find a common ground for governing together.

While some space in the M5S-Lega contract was given to specific procedures envisaged for managing inter-party conflict, most of its content was devoted to listing (in alphabetical order) the policies to which the two coalition parties committed themselves. Indeed, only 6.5 per cent of the 17,400 words included in the contract dealt with non-policy issues (M5S & Lega 2018). The initial section of the agreement focused on procedural issues, in particular on the functioning of the coalition government and on the working of the parliamentary party groups that constituted the majority coalition. After this, each section was devoted to one of 29 different topics, starting from ‘Public Water’ (*Acqua pubblica*) and ‘Agriculture and Fishing – Made in Italy’ (*Agricoltura e pesca – made in Italy*), and ending with ‘European Union’ (*Unione Europea*) and ‘University and Research’ (*Università e ricerca*).

But how did the M5S-Lega contract distribute attention across political topics? To what degree did the agreement – i.e. the official policy agenda of the government – incorporate the policy priorities of the two coalition partners? And which of the two ruling parties was better able to influence the government agenda? Did this agreement favour convergence between the coalition partners and reduce their overall polarisation? To answer these questions, we used a common classification scheme to analyse the policy content of the coalition agreement and the electoral manifestos of the M5S and the Lega.

More precisely, we split the text of the coalition agreement into 816 quasi-sentences, which we coded by looking at their policy content following the Comparative Agendas Project (CAP) codebook.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, we used Manifesto Project data on the electoral programmes issued in 2018, whereby party manifestos were split into quasi-sentences and the latter were manually coded depending on their policy content (Volkens et al. 2019). As the CAP and Manifesto schemes are

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<sup>5</sup> For further details, see <http://www.comparativeagendas.org/>.

not directly comparable, we employed a coding method that matches the 56 categories of the Manifesto Project with the 213 topics of the CAP codebook (see Conti, Pedrazzani & Russo 2019). According to this method, the Manifesto-CAP pairs are aggregated into 18 broader policy domains, each dealing with a substantive policy area. The policy domains are: Foreign Policy; Military & Defence; European Union; Freedom, Human Rights & Democracy; Federalism & Constitution; Government Operations & Administration; Market Regulation; Macroeconomic Policy & Approach; Foreign Trade Policy; Technology & Infrastructure; Environment & Energy; Culture; National Way of Life & Discrimination; Welfare State; Education; Law & Order; Labour; Agriculture.

Following a standard approach in the comparative agenda literature, we consider as policy priorities those policies receiving a considerable level of attention by parties (Jones & Baumgartner 2005). Starting with the content of the M5S-Lega agreement, Figure 1 reports results from our coding. As shown in the graph, exactly the same emphasis (12.9 per cent of quasi-sentences) was given to two issues which can be regarded as the most important priorities identified in the agreement: Law & Order and Welfare. This hardly comes as a surprise, as these themes were salient for the two (prospective) coalition partners during the campaign preceding the 2018 election. In the contract, many of the quasi-sentences falling into the Welfare category dealt with the universal scheme of guaranteed income promised by the Movement during the election campaign. Most of the quasi-sentences coded as Law & Order reflected instead the Lega's electoral pledges about adopting stricter policies on crime and illegal immigration or extending citizens' self-protection rights against private property violations. In this respect, Valbruzzi (2018) suggests considering the M5S-Lega agreement as a juxtaposition of the most salient and iconic policy

measures proposed by the two coalition parties, rather than a true synthesis of their respective electoral platforms and policy priorities.

In terms of salience, Education ranks third of all issues mentioned in the coalition agreement, being the subject with 9.7 per cent of quasi-sentences. Many of these concerned reforms of the university system or the dismantling of the measures applied to state schools by the former centre-left governments led by Renzi and Gentiloni. The fourth most emphasised issue was Culture (9.2 per cent), with a number of (often vague) references to the protection of Italy's natural and cultural heritage and to promotion of tourism in the country.

Remarkably, only 6 per cent of the M5S-Lega contract was devoted to Macroeconomic Policy & Approach. Most of the quasi-sentences in this domain either expressed criticism towards the austerity provisions enacted by past governments, or they dealt with the flat tax rate on income promised specifically by the Lega during the election campaign. When one considers the primacy of the economy in the activity of any government in general, and of the yellow-green government in particular (suffice it to consider the lengthy negotiations of the yellow-green cabinet with the EU about the state deficit and the subsequent restructuring of the budgetary law to meet EU financial constraints), it appears striking that this field received such limited attention in the agreement, thus leaving most of the controversies unsettled. Certainly, this weakness is revealing of the overall quality of the M5S-Lega coalition agreement. One may suppose that the incapacity of the coalition partners to compromise their polarised stances on the economy drove them to simply drop many unsettled issues from the agreement – a way to temper conflict during government formation, but unfortunately not to avoid intra-coalition conflict during day-to-day policymaking.

The attention given to two other domains in the agreement is telling as to the extent to which the two ruling parties had to relinquish some of their programmatic priorities when bargaining over the formation of the Conte I executive. On the one hand, Environment & Energy has undoubtedly been one of the fundamental issues in the M5S' campaign since it came into being (Bordignon & Ceccarini 2013; Conti & Memoli 2015; Corbetta & Gualmini 2013). However, probably as a result of the need to reach a compromise with the Lega (a party antagonised by the Movement's vision of a green economy based on anti-growth measures), this domain was de-emphasised and actually ranked just fifth in terms of salience in the coalition agreement (7.4 per cent). On the other hand, Federalism & Constitution ranked seventh (3.7 per cent). This seems to support the idea that, under Salvini's leadership, the Lega has really evolved from being a regionalist party to a more typical nationalist and radical-right force (Passarelli & Tuorto 2018). Also, when negotiating the coalition agreement, the Lega was ready to sacrifice its past top priority in the name of other concerns. Among these were the concerns of its government partner, notoriously not so open to federalism and to keeping a large share of taxation at the local level, and more focused instead on internal solidarity and help to the southern regions of the country that also constitute the main electoral stronghold of the M5S.

Somewhat unexpectedly, the coalition agreement devoted very scarce attention to the European Union, as EU-related topics take up less than 3 per cent of the document. Furthermore, the quasi-sentences touching upon those topics barely reflected the tough eurosceptic positions taken by the two ruling parties before the 2018 elections. This indicates that both the M5S and the Lega had to tone down their euroscepticism when drafting the coalition contract and negotiating the formation of the Conte government, during a bargaining process that was also influenced by the intervention of the very europhile President of the Republic who proved essential in preserving

the international credibility of the country and in advancing the process from stalemate to government formation (Santana Pereira & Moury 2018; Valbruzzi 2018).

To understand the degree to which the content of the coalition agreement was influenced by the specific priorities of the M5S and the Lega, we now compare the agreement with the manifestos of the two parties (M5S 2018; Lega 2018) in terms of how attention was distributed across policy domains. In particular, Figure 2 graphically displays the percentage of quasi-sentences addressing each policy topic in the three documents. Quite interestingly, this picture allows us to argue that the coalition agreement cannot simply be considered a result of a ‘cold fusion’ between the electoral platforms of the M5S and the Lega. The coalition contract qualifies as a more complex document, whose correspondence with the manifestos of the two coalition partners is far from linear. As illustrated in the graph, only one (Law & Order) of the two issues prioritised in the coalition contract was also prioritised by one of the two government parties (notably, the Lega) in its manifesto. Indeed, Law & Order presents about the same level of saliency in the Lega’s manifesto (11.2 per cent) as in the coalition agreement (12.9 per cent).

Things are different in the case of the other policy topics prioritised in the contract: in purely quantitative terms, Welfare was not the top priority in the manifesto of either the M5S (3.1 per cent) or the Lega (4.8 per cent). Only in subsequent parliamentary activity did Welfare become a signature issue of the M5S (see below). This is not to say that the two parties did not commit to reforming the Italian welfare system before drafting the contract; quite the opposite. The policy measures that the M5S (citizens’ basic income) and the Lega (financing of early retirement) proposed during the campaign were so important, complex and controversial that they needed to be specified in detail and locked into the coalition agreement. This was especially true for the citizens’ basic income, which in the contract received most of the attention devoted to Welfare

issues. Apart from these two flagship measures, however, the Welfare chapter was not particularly developed by either party.

Figure 2 also illustrates that both the M5S and the Lega had to compromise their respective agendas considerably in order to reach a mutual agreement. Although Environment & Energy was by far the most important policy category in the M5S manifesto (34.2 per cent), it became only residual in the coalition agreement (7.6 per cent). Likewise, National Way of Life & Discrimination turned out to be the most important topic in the Lega's electoral platform (17.6 per cent), but it was greatly de-emphasised in the coalition agreement (5.3 per cent).

Summing up, our analysis reveals that the M5S-Lega coalition contract diverged quite a lot from the specific policy priorities that the two parties outlined in their respective electoral manifestos. Such a shift in policy prioritisation can hardly be attributed to strategic changes in the programmatic identity of the two parties. During the three months between March and May 2018 there occurred no external events such as emergencies or unexpected shocks that might have required actions that could differ from, or even contradict, the pledges made by parties at election time. Therefore, we interpret the divergence between party manifestos and contract as the outcome of negotiations and bargaining between two parties whose policy priorities were rather distant. This process eventually produced a lowest common denominator agreement which was not fully representative of the policy priorities of the two parties. The price to pay for their programmatic polarisation was, indeed, the formation of an unconnected coalition between parties which were distant from each other in several policy fields. The M5S was the party that probably paid higher costs in this process, especially considering its role as major partner within the coalition, as the top priorities in its manifestos (ratified in several membership ballots through the party online

platform) never scored high in the coalition agreement (possibly due to its inexperience and first time involvement in coalition building).

### **Implementing the government agenda: a conflictual enterprise**

The yellow-green government reached office in a climate of excitement, hope and fear. Supporters and critics alike saw the Conte I government as a unique experiment and expected to see the first all-populist government in Italy bring discontinuity in method and substance. The coalition agreement advocated for change in many policy fields, an expectation that was reinforced by the words of PM Conte who, during his inaugural speech, proudly claimed the populist nature of the government and its radical discontinuity with the past.

But to what extent was the ‘government of change’ able to implement its programmatic agenda despite the polarisation of its components? What were the main policy measures enacted by such a heterogeneous coalition? Following the termination of the Conte I cabinet in September 2019, we can confidently argue that its capacity to implement an overambitious agenda was, in fact, limited. This is because, as soon as both the M5S and the Lega managed to get their flagship measures approved by parliament, the internal contradictions plaguing the coalition became too evident to be ignored. To illustrate our argument, we now provide an account of the most prominent policy achievements of the yellow-green government along with the main intra-coalition tensions that emerged during the implementation of the government agenda.

According to Marangoni and Verzichelli (2019), the difficulty of the ‘government of change’ to turn the many expectations of discontinuity into concrete policies first materialised in the speech given by the PM before the investiture vote in the Senate. The programmatic density of the speech, measured as the number of concrete policy commitments in every 500 words, was

among the lowest if we consider all Italian cabinets since 1996. A more qualitative assessment of Conte's speech revealed that the PM was much more inclined to illustrate the broad objectives outlined in the coalition agreement than to make a list of specific policy proposals and a plan of implementation.

To give a concise assessment of the government's capacity to translate its priorities into policy decisions, we now offer a quantitative and qualitative analysis of its legislative activities. In purely quantitative terms, we note that 68 laws were approved by the Italian parliament during the 15 months between the inauguration of the yellow-green cabinet (1 June 2018) and Conte's resignation (20 August 2019). Among them, 46 laws were sponsored by the government, 21 were submitted by members of parliament and one was of popular initiative. Laws originating from the government can be broken down into those converting decree-laws (22), those related to the budget (3), ordinary bills (5), and those ratifying international agreements (16). With regard to laws originating from the parliament, it is striking to note that most of them (15 out of 21, 71 per cent) were initiated by representatives belonging to the M5S and only four came from the Lega. We interpret this as evidence of the fact that, within the Lega, there was a clear predominance of the party in government compared to the parliamentary group. On the contrary, leadership in the M5S was more diffuse and the party in government was probably not in full control of (the policy agenda of) the parliamentary group. Finally, two laws were sponsored by opposition groups.

A comparison with the legislative activity of previous governments reveals many elements of continuity with the past, counterbalanced by some peculiarities of the Conte I cabinet (Marangoni & Verzichelli 2019; Giannetti, Pinto & Plescia 2020). On the one hand, the yellow-green executive issued 22 decree-laws – that is, one every three weeks. The frequent reliance on decree-laws to impose the government's agenda on parliament has been a typical characteristic of

Italian law-making since the 1980s, when this tool – originally reserved to address extraordinary and urgent problems – became a stratagem to bypass the resistance of fragmented coalitions. Moreover, when excluding ratification laws of international treaties (whose approval cannot be taken as an indicator of the cabinet’s steering capacity), the success rate of the bills proposed by the yellow-green executive is in line with that of other recent governments. Finally, the Conte I cabinet often relied on confidence votes to convert its decree-laws, a strategy commonly pursued by Italian governments to limit the capacity of parliament to introduce substantial amendments during the conversion process.

On the other hand, when compared with the recent experience of the Renzi and the Gentiloni cabinets it appears that the yellow-green government made very limited use of ordinary laws and laws with delegating powers. In other words, one distinguishing feature of the Conte I government was its tendency to manage the legislative process by concentrating its most important priorities in a few decree-laws. Probably as a consequence of the ideological divergence within the coalition, only the few bills on which the governing parties had agreed on were able to reach the parliamentary floor. As we have seen, this left unrealised in particular many of the priorities of the M5S.

Moving now to a qualitative assessment, Table 4 presents the major measures taken by the yellow-green cabinet. Arguably, the most relevant policy initiatives of the cabinet were a pension reform known as *quota 100* and a basic income plan dubbed *reddito di cittadinanza* (citizenship income). Both measures had been included in the ‘Contract for the government of change’ as flagship issues of the Lega and of the M5S, respectively. The *quota 100* provision modified an unpopular restructuring of the Italian pension system introduced by the Monti cabinet in December 2011, at the height of the Eurozone crisis. The new reform allowed workers to retire at the age of

62 provided that they had at least 38 years of paid contributions, lowering the existing requirements substantially. In order to fully appreciate the importance of this measure for the Lega, it must be remembered that the early termination of the Berlusconi IV cabinet in November 2011 (in which the Lega participated) was ultimately triggered by its unwillingness to pass a reform to increase retirement age (Cavaliere, Russo & Verzichelli 2018), a measure that the Lega openly opposed and that was later enacted by the Monti cabinet. The citizenship income was a key campaign issue for the M5S and it was boldly presented by its leader Di Maio as a measure capable of ‘abolishing poverty’ in Italy (La Repubblica 2018b). Interestingly, during the joint presentation of these measures to the Italian press on 18 January 2019, Salvini took the opportunity to blatantly distance himself from the citizenship income: while Conte and Di Maio struck a pose holding a sign with the two measures *quota 100* and *reddito di cittadinanza*, Salvini showed a sign with no reference to the citizenship income.

The two aforementioned measures required a significant increase in current expenditure, and their implementation put the budget under stress, creating a conflict with the European Commission (Codogno & Merler 2019). The original draft of the budget law for 2019 submitted by the Italian government to the Commission (based on the assumption of a deficit of 2.4 per cent of GDP and of an overly optimistic growth rate for 2019) was a deliberate violation of the EU fiscal rules. The proposed draft (and the subsequent threat by the Commission to open an infringement procedure for excessive debt) provoked an immediate negative reaction from financial markets and a sharp increase in Italy’s borrowing costs. The government was hence forced to revise the draft budget and to agree with the Commission on a new public deficit target (2.04 per cent of GDP), bringing Italy more in line with previous commitments. The government’s attempt to challenge the legitimacy and validity of the rules governing the Euro and the authority

of the Commission proved unsuccessful in the end. This attempt was also accompanied by repeated rhetorical assaults on the EU that isolated Italy from its traditional allies and took the country somehow closer to the ‘Visegrad countries’.

During its life, the yellow-green government also adopted a bunch of measures with far fewer economic consequences but full of symbolic value: two decrees sponsored by Salvini enacting restrictive policies on migration (*Decreti sicurezza* or ‘Security Decrees’) and the anti-corruption law (*Spazzacorrotti*, ‘Sweep Away The Corrupt’) proposed by the Minister of Justice Alfonso Bonafede (M5S).

As is well known, the refugee crisis boosted the salience of migration in Italy (Quaranta & Martini 2019) and created a marked polarisation, dividing voters and parties along the integration-demarcation cleavage. In the yellow-green coalition, the Lega was the partner with a more pronounced anti-European and anti-immigrant character, while the M5S adopted more blurred stances especially on the latter issue. It is hardly surprising that, once in office, Salvini found it convenient to ride the wave of the refugee crisis: with the two security decrees, he promised to make Italy a safer country by blocking NGO rescue ships and adopting stricter rules to grant the status of refugee. At the same time, the Lega waged a campaign highlighting the inability of the EU institutions to address the crisis.

Salvini’s strategy generated heated controversies not only between majority and opposition parties but also within the M5S parliamentary party group.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, five M5S senators refused to give a vote of confidence on the law converting the first of the security decrees, and 18 M5S deputies wrote a public letter complaining that some of the decree’s provisions exceeded the

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<sup>6</sup> The *Lega*’s immigration policy was harshly opposed by left and centre-left parties outside the government (PD and LEU), but not by the right-wing FI and FDI. The latter two parties voted in favour of Salvini’s Security Decrees.

compromise sealed by the coalition agreement (Trocino 2018). In this regard, it has been shown that a majority of Italian citizens favoured the restrictive turn on migration promoted by Salvini, and that the refugee crisis seriously contributed to the erosion of popular support for the EU (Quaranta & Martini 2019). More in general, accounts of the voting intentions of Italian citizens reveal that, under the yellow-green executive, the Lega was able to increase its popularity, while public support for the M5S significantly dropped (Giannetti, Pinto & Plescia 2020).

The anti-corruption law can be seen as the equivalent flagship measure for the M5S. The *Spazzacorrotti* law was emphatically (and quite misleadingly) described by several M5S leading members as the first anti-corruption reform adopted in Italy since the judicial scandals of the early 1990s (Corso 2019, p. 476). It included provisions to hold public officials accountable for corruption related crimes by introducing more severe penalties and a longer statute of limitations as well as longer bans from holding public offices for those convicted. After the publication of the bill, which was signed only by Minister Bonafede, Salvini publicly expressed some caveats and warnings on the conformity of the bill to the Italian Constitution declaring that, ‘We must take care to ensure that an individual is considered innocent up until the third level of judgement; summary trials are not for civilised countries’ (La Repubblica 2018a).

In sum, although the coalition agreement was the outcome of a complex bargaining process, the most important policies implemented by the yellow-green government seemed to come more from the juxtaposition of the distinct priorities of the two parties rather than being the result of a commonly defined mission. Aside from the pension reform, approval of all of them was marked by some critical comments from one of the two coalition partners. Polarisation and the consequent policy unconnectedness between the ruling partners made the implementation of the coalitional agreement an unavoidably conflictual enterprise. Generally speaking, intra-cabinet

conflict was present throughout the life of the Conte I government. Rather than being settled in the conciliation committee, intra-cabinet disagreements were reconciled in (often late-night) party summits involving the leaders of the two coalition parties or in meetings where also the PM participated. In terms of popularity, government activity was much more rewarding for the Lega than for the Movement, which had to compromise its policy priorities more.

### **Policy polarisation in parliament**

We now analyse policy polarisation in parliament under the yellow-green government by looking at how parliamentary questions are used to prioritise certain issues. The possibility for parliamentarians to pose questions to members of the executive on the floor of the chamber is typical of many legislatures. Parliamentary questions often attract significant media attention and are studied by political scientists for many reasons (Franklin & Norton 1993; Martin & Rozenberg 2012; Russo & Wiberg 2010). Scholars interested in party competition have investigated parliamentary questioning to understand which issues parties decide to prioritise between elections (Vliegthart & Walgrave 2011). From this perspective, the nature of parliamentary questions is similar to that of electoral manifestos: they are just another instrument that political parties can use to emphasise issues that are advantageous to themselves. In particular, parliamentary questioning gives to opposition parties the opportunity to mark their distance from the government on their preferred policy issues. However, parliamentary questions are not only a tool in the hands of opposition parties. In the case of coalition governments, parties may use questions as a control mechanism to scrutinise the behaviour of their partners and to monitor the implementation of the coalition compromise (Höhmann & Sieberer 2020; Martin & Whitaker 2019). In this light,

parliamentary questions can be seen as an additional tool that is available in the legislative arena to manage intra-coalitional conflict and to enforce coalition bargains (Martin & Vanberg 2011).

In what follows we analyse the weekly Question Time held in the Italian Chamber of Deputies to track the issues receiving more attention from the majority and opposition parties. With regard to governing parties, we assess whether a party's questions were addressed to ministers belonging to their coalition partner – thus serving a scrutiny function – or were simply used to emphasise its signature issues in policy areas where the ideological distance with the partner was particularly large. The latter case would be a clear sign of intra-coalitional polarisation. Moving to opposition parties, we will look at the issues they prioritised assuming that they can reveal the main dimensions of conflict between them and the government.

Italian Question Time – a short name for the procedure officially named ‘Questions for Immediate Reply’ – is held once a week, usually on Wednesday, in the Chamber of Deputies (Russo & Cavalieri 2016). Each parliamentary group can table one question per week.<sup>7</sup> Thanks to the peculiar feature of Italian Question Time, where all parties are granted the possibility to ask one question per week regardless of their majority or opposition status, we can observe not only the behaviour of the parties in opposition during the Conte I government (FI, FDI, PD and LEU), but also how the two ruling parties acted. This is quite unique within Southern Europe (Borghetto & Russo 2018, p. 69) and makes Italy an ideal case for this kind of analysis.

Just as we did with the coalition agreement, we used the CAP scheme to manually classify each question posed in the Italian Chamber between mid-June 2018 and mid-June 2019 (that is,

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<sup>7</sup> Questions have to be submitted to the Speaker of the Chamber the day preceding Question Time. The Rules of Procedure require that questions must address a general and urgent issue, but judging whether this requirement is met is hardly a technical question: in practice, all questions presented in the last legislative term were admitted.

all parliamentary questions asked under the Conte I cabinet during weekly question time) on the basis of its specific policy content. Our analysis focuses on the questions delivered by the members of the six largest parliamentary groups. This leaves us with a dataset of 254 questions. Results of our coding are displayed in Table 5, where we present the aggregate distribution of the issues touched by the questions asked by both opposition and government parties. For the sake of comparison, we also report the distribution of attention computed for all the parties – which we call parliamentary agenda – and in the coalition agreement.

To begin with, we note that Law & Order and Welfare were the most important topics in both the coalition agreement and in the overall parliamentary agenda. These two issues, which had been crucial in the electoral campaigns of the two ruling parties, and on which the government's most relevant policy initiatives were based, travelled smoothly from the coalition agreement to the parliamentary arena structuring the debate during the life of the yellow-green government. However, the majority parties adopted a specific strategy: parliamentary questions were not mainly used to keep a check on the coalition partner, but rather to further emphasise each party's signature issues. The Lega devoted considerable attention to topics related to Law & Order, despite its leader Salvini holding the Ministry of Interior that is in charge of these issues. Similarly, the M5S preferred to emphasise Welfare issues (those under the jurisdiction of the portfolio held by its leader Di Maio), followed by Environmental issues (the top priority in the manifesto issued by the Movement before the 2018 election, then neglected in the coalition agreement). As is apparent, each of the ruling parties framed its parliamentary agenda in such a way as to take a cue from the party's electoral manifesto in its own area of specialisation (in which it expected to enjoy an edge over competitors). We consider this evidence of the fact that, despite efforts to tone it down during

government formation and drafting of the coalition agreement, polarisation between the two coalition partners fired up again soon after.

Moving to the main opposition parties, the PD appeared to use questions to challenge the government on Welfare issues, mirroring the priority of the M5S but at the same time, criticising the inadequacy of its policies. Rather than signalling polarisation, this strategy can be interpreted as a move to erode the perceived competence of the challenger on the typical signature issues of the left. By contrast, Forza Italia adopted a more peculiar approach, criticising the policies of the government with the goal of magnifying the ideological distance separating the two coalition partners. In particular, by attacking the inability of the government to make decisions on several major infrastructure projects, FI tried to persuade right-wing voters that the decision of the *Lega* to enter a coalition with the M5S was negative for its constituency, proposing itself instead as a more credible partner for any coalition with the same *Lega*.

### **The legacy of the yellow-green government and the Conte II cabinet**

During its 15 months of life, the populist coalition supporting the Conte I government did not prove very stable, nor very efficient in terms of policymaking. With the sole exception of the Letta government (2013-2014), the Conte I cabinet approved fewer laws by month than any other Italian government (Giannetti, Pinto & Plescia 2020). Both the Letta and the Conte I executives were based on a heterogeneous coalition. However, while the former was never particularly popular, the public image of the latter deteriorated greatly because of the high expectations of policy reform associated with the ascendance to power of two challengers such as M5S and the *Lega*. Many of these expectations were frustrated because of policy deadlock within the government. In particular, while in the aftermath of the 2018 elections the two coalition partners were close to each other in

terms of issues such as the EU, their economic divergences came increasingly to the fore in the subsequent post-electoral policymaking. The distance between the anti-tax position of the Lega and the state spending promoted by the M5S (see Table 1) posed a significant hurdle when the two parties had to make joint policy under budget constraints.

The two parties clashed also on a number of more specific policy issues, from basic income to decentralisation. On top of that, when the M5S started to reconsider its position regarding the EU and decided to support Ursula Von der Leyen as EU Commission President, Europe became another polarising issue within the government. The Lega voted against and fired back, arguing that the M5S had betrayed Italians by voting for a candidate proposed by Emmanuel Macron and Angela Merkel and supported by the Italian opposition. The very last dispute within the coalition concerned an EU-funded high-speed rail project between the cities of Turin and Lyon. After the M5S voted in parliament to block the project (arguing that it was too costly, unnecessary and bad for the environment), the Lega convinced enough MPs to thwart the motion and keep the project going (with the justification that it would help economic growth and create jobs).

The Conte I government was finally dissolved after the leader of the Lega declared on 8 August 2019 that it was impossible to overcome the intra-coalitional conflict. Indeed, Salvini did not propose any solution to save the legislative term, but only aimed at contesting new elections at a time when the Lega was highest in the polls. In the European elections of May 2019, the Lega impressively achieved 34 per cent of the votes, whereas the M5S received 17.1, having halved its votes in about one year. Salvini withdrew his party from the government as he sought to exploit his own popularity to bring about snap elections and become the new PM. In his view, a right-wing coalition would have won the new elections easily and the Lega would have obtained the lion's share in the new government. However, Italian politics took a different course of action from

what Salvini expected. In late August, the M5S reached an agreement on a new coalition with the PD, this time willing to enter a government, and the small leftist LEU. As a consequence, the Lega was confined to the opposition.

Regardless of the outcome brought about by Salvini's sudden move, what the break down of the yellow-green coalition made evident was the almost total absence of effective mechanisms of conflict management within the government, something that would have been needed given the level of polarisation between coalition partners. In this regard, let us firstly underline that the specific procedures envisaged in the coalition agreement (above all, the conciliation committee) to manage inter-party conflict were never put into practice. The coalition agreement was then inadequate for anticipating and managing conflict within the cabinet.

Secondly, the leaders of the two coalition parties (Di Maio and Salvini), as well as many key party figures, actually held cabinet office. Although this should have favoured conflict resolution within the cabinet, conflict resolution was not a main preoccupation of the Conte I government. Apart from meetings between Di Maio and Salvini which sometimes also included the PM, no other particular strategies were employed to handle intra-coalition disagreement (Zucchini & Pedrazzani 2020).

Thirdly, the inexperience of the Prime Minister who, at the time, was completely new to politics, may have contributed to this failure, given not only his lack of authority with respect to the government coalition, but also his likely underestimation of centrifugal drives within the cabinet. Generally speaking, Conte avoided involvement in intra-coalitional conflicts – rare conduct in the recent history of Italian prime ministers (Marangoni & Vercesi 2015). This created, as a side effect, a lack of leadership from his side in guiding government decision making.

Fourthly, the personality of the two party leaders, Di Maio and Salvini, certainly contributed to jeopardising the atmosphere within the coalition. They had been the successful leaders of two challenger parties fighting each other (and the rest of the political spectrum). Once in office, they found it hard to change their posture and to create a more cooperative attitude. Their efforts to compete with one another to maximise their electoral support often outweighed their efforts to act as allies. In general, they made greater efforts to own their signature issues than to design and implement a comprehensive government programme. In their reciprocal competition they often adopted a strategy of de-legitimising the other (especially by denying policy competence or recognition of the policy priorities of the other). Their use of the media also contributed to poisoning the atmosphere, as Di Maio and Salvini, as well as many other party officials of the M5S and the Lega, were vocal about intra-coalition conflicts rather than downplaying internal disagreement. Antagonistic statements in the media certainly contributed to augmenting the level of tension within the coalition.

In the end, the fall of the Conte I government created conditions for fierce enmity between the M5S and the Lega thenceforth. In late August 2019, the M5S was clearly not ready for snap elections given its dramatic loss of public support since 2018. This made a deal finally possible between the two longstanding party adversaries (and largest parties in parliament), the M5S and the PD. Although Di Maio was initially not in favour of this solution, a coalition with the PD was endorsed by the party founder Beppe Grillo, the influential Davide Casaleggio (son of the party's co-founder Gianroberto Casaleggio and president of the Rousseau Association, which runs the online platform where M5S members can vote on party policies) and the majority of MPs within the M5S. This choice was also backed by grassroots members of the M5S who voted in favour of it online (through the Rousseau system). Under the pressure of the President of the Republic, who

threatened to call early elections in the absence of a new parliamentary majority, in just a couple of weeks, the M5S and the PD drafted a (slim) policy programme as the basis for the new coalition government, putting an expansionary 2020 budget at the top of their agenda. Conte was again chosen as PM. In early September, the Conte II executive won an investiture vote with 343 yes, 3 abstentions and 263 nays in the Chamber, and 169 yes, 5 abstentions and 133 nays in the Senate.

The Movement's shift from a coalition with the Lega to a coalition with the PD was also grounded on policy considerations. In the Conte II executive, polarisation on the economic dimension – a particularly relevant dimension in day-to-day policymaking – appears reduced if compared to the Conte I government, as all coalition members promote expansionary policy. Indeed, M5S, PD and LEU are on the left side of the *taxes vs spending* scale (see Table 1). The so called 'yellow-red' cabinet is also more cohesive than the yellow-green one in terms of environment protection. The Conte II coalition is however less cohesive on other domains. In spite of the Movement's recent shift in a more pro-EU direction (see above), its distance from the PD remains significant on European matters. Whereas under the most turbulent years of the economic crisis the PD was the guardian of fiscal retrenchment dictated by the EU, the M5S holds a more eurosceptic and anti-austerity stance. Moreover, the two parties diverge on issues of law and order, as the M5S defends the Security Decrees whose relaxation is instead a firm goal of the PD. Also, the PD is more in favour of a legal system safeguarding civil liberties and judicial protection while the M5S endorses tougher attitudes in courts.

In the (so far) short life of the Conte II cabinet, these differences have already created tensions within the coalition. It would certainly be premature at this stage to make predictions about this new government's stability and capacity to promote an efficient policy agenda. The time since government formation is too short, and only a few months after the cabinet took office the

coronavirus emergency pushed the country into an exceptional situation. Also with the Conte II executive, most of the mechanisms of conflict avoidance and management that could contribute to giving stability to the cabinet have remained unsettled. It remains to be seen if, in the long term, the centrifugal pressures within this unprecedented coalition (the ruling parties have never coalesced before) will cause the same kind of erosion as in the past or, lesson learnt, other solutions will be found in order to stabilise the government. At the time of writing, it is also too early to say something about patterns of polarisation between the government and the opposition. The coronavirus emergency seems to have (temporarily) diminished the salience of issues on which government-opposition conflict may well develop in the future.

## **Conclusions**

Comparative studies have highlighted the key role of policy polarisation in shaping party competition and in affecting the life cycle of governments, from their formation to their termination. This paper has illustrated the role of policy polarisation in the short and conflictual life of the Conte I cabinet in Italy.

Since its birth, the yellow-green government showed evidence of instability and of being based on a fragile compromise between two ideologically unconnected parties. The different policy preferences of the M5S and the Lega emerged soon after, when the coalition found itself divided by heated discussions over different policy positions and priorities, and by reciprocal accusations of lack of competence. Initially, the innovative nature of the cabinet was also symbolised by the decision to write a detailed post-electoral coalition agreement. This coalition contract did not bring peace within government; on the contrary it was called many times into question by the same coalition partners who largely ignored it, preferring instead to focus on their

signature issues (sometimes neglected in the same contract). In the end, this agreement left unsolved several controversies between the two coalition partners, and many of their respective policy priorities were excluded from the agreement which, as such, could not work as a tool for conflict avoidance.

At the same time, the mechanisms designed for conflict management (such as a conciliation committee) were never seriously implemented. Policy oriented conflict between coalition partners detonated soon well beyond usual intra-government disagreement. Furthermore, the peculiar figure of the Prime Minister, an unelected official and a newcomer to politics, certainly added to the problem of conflict management within this government, as he never showed he was in control of either his coalition or policy agenda. Finally, the personal factor also played a role: when in government, Di Maio and Salvini prioritised electoral competition rather than government responsibility and their attitude nourished antagonism between the two coalition partners on a scale that soon became unsustainable.

In Western Europe, the yellow-green government represents a rare case of a coalition of radicals. This experiment appeared to vacillate from the start; certainly, the self definition of government of change hardly corresponds to the scope of reforms that were implemented. Two welfare measures, pertaining to a universal scheme of basic income and to retirement age, are the most prominent achievements of this government and are expected to last longer than their sponsoring government. Their straightforward cancellation would produce high costs in terms of popularity for any cabinet, something that the incumbent leftist coalition (including the M5S) would apparently not be keen to sustain. Instead, the tough measures against illegal immigration have already been relaxed by the new government (and their repeal is under discussion). Otherwise, not much legacy has been left by the maverick experience of the yellow-green

government which, in many respects, appears to have been a temporary experiment rather than a new course of action. The two main protagonists (M5S and Lega) have firmly distanced themselves from this experience and none of their strategies now includes the other; on the contrary, their enmity has increased to an unprecedented level, even compared to the pre-2018 period.

In the end, we can argue that both the formation and early termination of the yellow-green government epitomise the degree of polarisation and possible chaos reached by the Italian party system. Polarisation between the two coalition partners was evident from their programmatic stances at election time, and emerged again during parliamentary activities after being silenced in the coalition agreement. Policy polarisation was also signalled by policy deadlock and high intra-cabinet conflict when the M5S and the Lega were in government. On the one hand, such an unlikely partnership was made possible by the inconclusive results of the 2018 election, the reluctance of the PD to return to government after an exceptional electoral defeat, and lack of leadership within the centre-right coalition, whose most voted party (Lega) did not hesitate to break away from its electoral allies to form a government with its former adversary M5S. On the other hand, due to its internal polarisation, the announcements of the yellow-green government to change the country appeared bound to fail from the beginning. The inability of the two coalition partners to lock in a more credible and comprehensive policy programme – either from the start, or later in the life cycle of the new government – as well as their failure to design mechanisms of intra-coalition conflict management, reveal the gap between pronouncements and the real capacity of the yellow-green government to mark a durable and unparalleled course of action in the life of the Italian government. Although focused on a single case study, our work has broader implications for the comparative study of coalition governments in parliamentary democracies, as it shows how,

in the absence of effective leadership and credible institutional solutions to problems of intense policy divisions between coalition partners, polarisation can seriously undermine government stability.

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## Tables

**Table 1.** Policy positions of Italian parties in the general elections of 2018.

Party	Vote share in the Chamber (number of seats)	Vote share in the Senate (number of seats)	Position on European integration	Position on immigration	Position on taxes vs spending	Position on civil rights	Position on environment
LEU	3.4 (14)	3.3 (4)	9.5	4.1	5.5	4.8	6.4
PD	18.7 (111)	19.2 (52)	7.6	7.1	9.4	5.7	9.3
M5S	32.7 (222)	32.2 (109)	15.7	13.8	9.7	9.5	5.8
FI	14.0 (105)	14.4 (61)	14.5	16.3	15.4	13.4	16.9
<i>Lega</i>	17.3 (124)	17.6 (58)	18.8	19.4	14.4	16.3	16.5
FDI	4.4 (32)	4.3 (18)	18.0	19.0	11.3	17.2	15.3

*Notes:* *European integration* ranges from 1 ‘Party favours increasing the range of areas in which the EU can set policy’ to 20 ‘Party favours reducing the range of areas in which the EU can set policy’. *Immigration* ranges from 1 ‘Party favours policies designed to help asylum-seekers and immigrants integrate into Italy’s society’ to 20 ‘Party favours policies designed to help asylum-seekers and immigrants return to their country of origin’. *Taxes vs spending* ranges from 1 ‘Party promotes raising taxes to increase public services’ to 20 ‘Party promotes cutting public services to cut taxes’. *Civil rights* ranges from 1 ‘Party favours liberal policies on matters such as abortion, homosexuality, and euthanasia’ to 20 ‘Party opposes liberal policies on matters such as abortion, homosexuality, and euthanasia’. *Environment* ranges from 1 ‘Party supports protection of the environment, even at the cost of economic growth’ to 20 ‘Party supports economic growth, even at the cost of damage to the environment’. *European integration*, *immigration* and *taxes vs spending* are the first, second and third most salient policy dimensions according to the surveyed experts, with salience scores equal to 15.4, 15.1 and 13.9, respectively. The salience scale ranges from 1 to 20.

*Source:* Expert survey data from Giannetti, Pedrazzani and Pinto (2018).

**Table 2.** Government-formation process after the Italian elections of 4 March 2018.

<b>Designate PM</b>	<b>Informateur</b>	<b>Dates</b>	<b>Involved parties</b>	<b>Seats (Chamber)</b>	<b>Seats (Senate)</b>	<b>Outcome</b>
–	Maria Alberti Casellati	18-20 April 2018	M5S Lega FI FDI	483	246	Failed. M5S refuses to form a government including Berlusconi's party.
–	Roberto Fico	23-26 April 2018	M5S PD	333	161	Failed. PD rejects a coalition with M5S.
Giuseppe Conte		9-27 May 2018	M5S Lega	346	167	Failed. President of Republic rejects Paolo Savona as Minister of Economy.
Carlo Cottarelli		28-31 May 2018	(PD)	(111)	(52)	Failed. M5S and Lega start again bargaining over a new government.
Giuseppe Conte		31 May – 1 June 2018	M5S Lega	346	167	Successful. Formation of the Conte I government.

*Source:* Authors' elaboration based on official data (<https://www.camera.it/leg18/557?fiducia=16>).

*Notes:* Total number of seats: 629 in the Chamber, 320 in the Senate. In the 2018 election, the centre-right electoral coalition obtained 265 seats in the Chamber and 137 seats in the Senate. The centre-left coalition gained 122 seats in the Chamber and 59 seats in the Senate. In the case of Cottarelli attempt, only the PD declared their availability to support the government.

**Table 3.** Main pledges in the M5S and Lega election manifestos (2018) compared to the ‘government of change’ coalition agreement.

<b>Topic</b>	<b>M5S manifesto</b>	<b>Lega manifesto</b>	<b>Coalition agreement</b>
Welfare state / Labour	Introduction of a citizen basic income. Reform of the pension system, allowing workers to retire sooner. Reduction of weekly working hours. Measures to weaken the most powerful trade unions. Strengthening of the public healthcare system.	Reform of the pension system, allowing workers to retire sooner (quota 100). Introduction of a national minimum wage.	Reform of the pension system, allowing workers to retire sooner (quota 100). Introduction of a citizen basic income. Introduction of a national minimum wage.
Law and Order	Abolition of statute of limitations in judicial cases.	Measures to enforce public security. More severe penalties. Measures increasing the range of cases where the right of self-defence can be used as a legal justification for the use of force. Greater funding for law-enforcement authorities. Closing of Roma camps.	Reform of statute of limitations to reduce the length of trials. Increasing the range of cases where the right of self-defence can be used as a legal justification for the use of force. Closing of irregular Roma camps.
Technology & Infrastructure	Enhancing public debate and citizens’ participation in decisions concerning projects such as TAV high-speed rail and Trans Adriatic Pipeline (TAP).	Enhancing infrastructural projects.	Reassess the project of TAV high-speed rail.
Macroeconomic Policy & Approach / Market Regulation	Reduction of taxes, especially for citizens with mid-low income. Enhanced role of the state in promoting economic development. Restructuring of the banking system, separating corporate banking from commercial banking.	Flat tax rate (15%) on income. Restructuring of the banking system, separating corporate banking from commercial banking. Abolition of any limit to the use of cash.	Reforming taxes on income, adopting only two rates: 15% and 20%.

Environment & Energy	Green economy, reducing energy consumptions, shifting to renewable sources. Policies to protect the environment, reduce pollution, improve waste recycling and enhance sustainable mobility. Promotion of eco-friendly modes of transportation.		Promotion of eco-friendly modes of transportation.  Commitment to reduce waste and increase recycling.
Education / Culture	Greater funding for public education, abolition of public funds to private schools and reduction of work-related learning. Greater funding for public universities, revision of the rules for recruiting university personnel and revision of the mechanisms for evaluating research activities.	Retaining public funds for private schools.	Increase funding for universities and research centres. Revision of the rules for recruiting university personnel. Revision of the mechanisms for evaluating research activities.
National Way of Life & Discrimination / Freedom, Human Rights & Democracy	Mechanisms for redistributing refugees among EU member states.	Measures to reduce immigration flows and stricter rules against illegal immigration. Ban on NGO rescue ships and adoption of stricter rules to grant refugee status. Defence of traditional family.	Pressing for a reform of the EU asylum system in order to automatically redistribute migrants among member states. Stricter rules against illegal immigration.
Agriculture		Promotion of national agriculture and fishery. Obtaining better conditions for Italian agriculture in the European Common Agricultural Policy.	Obtaining better conditions for Italian agriculture in the European Common Agricultural Policy.
Military and Defence		Restoration of conscription.	Hiring new military police officers ( <i>Carabinieri</i> ).
Government Operations / Federalism & Constitution	Empowering of whistleblowing and measures against corruption.	Reduction of fiscal and administrative incumbencies. Introduction of small-sized state bonds as a way to	Tougher penalties against corruption.

	<p>Digitalisation of public administration and promotion of internet access for the citizenry.</p> <p>Cutting the costs of politics, for example by reducing the number of MPs.</p> <p>Introduction of participatory instruments such as referenda for initiating laws.</p> <p>Adoption of a new PR electoral system.</p>	<p>compensate citizens who claim a credit from the public administration.</p> <p>Reduction of the number of MPs.</p> <p>Reform of legislative-executive relationships towards presidentialism.</p> <p>Greater autonomy for Italian regions.</p>	
Foreign Policy / Foreign Trade Policy	Abolition of economic sanctions against Russia.	Partnership with Russia.	Abolition of economic sanctions against Russia. Closer partnership with Russia.
European Union	<p>Revision of the EU treaties and the rules governing the eurozone (opposition to austerity).</p> <p>Introduction of popular referenda on future EU treaties.</p> <p>Calling of a popular consultative referendum on Italy's eurozone membership.</p> <p>Issue of eurobonds, even if Germany opposes them.</p>	<p>Revision of the EU treaties and the rules governing the eurozone.</p> <p>Italy's exit from the eurozone (but not necessarily from the EU).</p> <p>Regaining sovereignty from the EU in terms of fiscal and commercial policies, border control, judicial policy and lawmaking.</p>	Revision of the EU treaties and the rules governing the eurozone.

*Notes:* The M5S' electoral pledges are taken from the party manifesto (M5S 2018). The Lega's electoral pledges are taken from the party manifesto (Lega 2018). The pledges of the Coalition Agreement are taken from the final version of the 'Contract for the Government of Change' (M5S & Lega 2018).

**Table 4.** Summary of the main policy measures implemented by the M5S-Lega government.

<b>Time</b>	<b>Measure</b>	<b>Description</b>
July 2018	<i>Decreto dignità</i> – Dignity Decree (Decree-Law 2018/87, Law 2018/96)	Measures to sustain employment, especially for new young workers
September 2018	<i>Decreto Genova</i> – Genoa Decree (Decree-Law 2018/109, Law 2018/130)	Measures to tackle the emergency caused by the collapse of the Morandi bridge in Genoa
October 2018	<i>Decreto sicurezza e immigrazione</i> – Security and Immigration Decree (Decree-Law 2018/113, Law 2018/132)	Measures to reduce illegal immigration and enforce public security
December 2018	<i>Legge di bilancio</i> – Budget law (Law 2018/145)	Government’s plan of intended revenues and expenditures
January 2019	<i>Decreto Carige</i> – Carige Decree (Decree-Law 2019/1, Law 2019/16)	Measures to help Carige Bank
	<i>Legge spazzacorrotti</i> – Sweep Away The Corrupt Decree (Law 2019/3)	Measures against corruption
	<i>Reddito di cittadinanza e Quota 100</i> – Citizen’s Basic Income and quota 100 provision (Decree-Law 2019/4, Law 2019/26)	Measures to implement a universal scheme of basic income and to lower retirement age
April 2019	<i>Decreto sblocca cantieri</i> – Unblock Construction Sites Decree (Decree-Law 2019/32, Law 2019/55)	Measures to stimulate public works
	<i>Decreto crescita</i> – Growth Decree (Decree-Law 2019/34, Law 2019/58)	Measures (such as subsidies) to help industries in crisis
	<i>Decreto Calabria</i> – Calabria Decree (Decree-Law 2019/35, Law 2019/60)	Measures to finance public health in Calabria region
	<i>Legge legittima difesa</i> – Self-Defence Law (Law 2019/36)	Measures increasing the range of cases where the right of self-defence can be used as a legal justification for the use of force
May 2019	<i>Legge europea</i> – European Law (Law 2019/37)	Annual law that transposes European directives into Italian legislation
June 2019	<i>Decreto sicurezza bis</i> – Security Decree B (Decree-Law 2019/53, Law 2019/77)	Measures to reduce immigration flows and enforce public security
	<i>Decreto salva conti</i> – Save Public Finance Decree (Decree Law 2019/61, Law 2019/85)	Economic measures requested by the European Commission to avoid an infringement procedure against Italy

Source: Authors’ elaboration based on official data on legislation passed by the Italian parliament.

See <http://www.parlamento.it/519>.

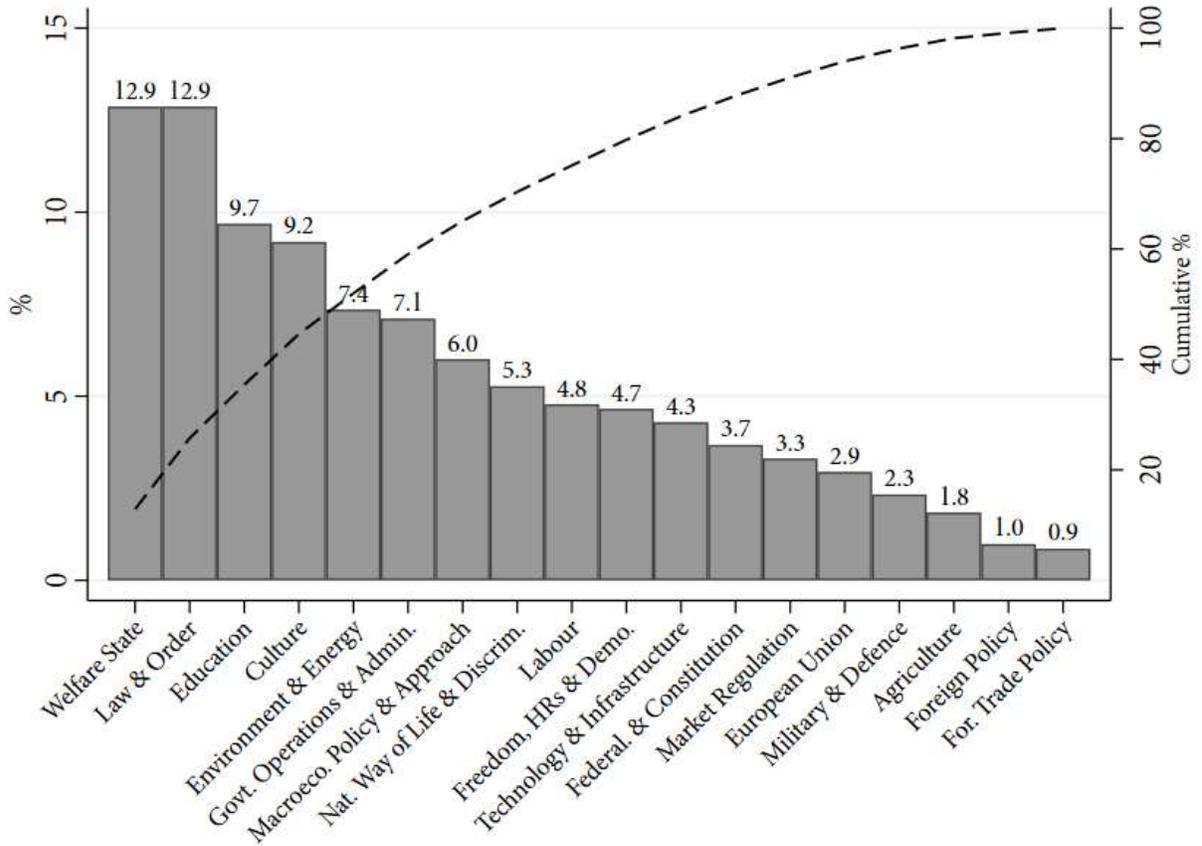
**Table 5.** Issue emphasis of parliamentary questions during the Government of Change compared to the coalition agreement.

Topic	Coalition Agreement	Government (PQs)		Opposition (PQs)				Total (PQs)
		Lega	M5S	FI	FDI	LEU	PD	
Welfare State	12.9	7.1	16.7	12.2	13.3	14.3	19.0	13.4
Law and Order	12.9	21.4	9.5	12.2	17.8	7.1	9.5	12.7
Technology & Infrastructure	4.3	9.5	9.5	19.5	4.4	4.8	9.5	11.3
Macroeconomic Policy & Approach	6.0	9.5	7.1	4.9	22.2	7.1	14.3	10.6
Environment & Energy	7.4	2.4	11.9	9.8	4.4	11.9	-	6.5
Government Operations	7.1	11.9	4.8	7.3	4.4	4.8	2.4	5.8
Culture	9.2	9.5	9.5	2.4	-	9.5	4.8	5.5
Labour	4.8	-	4.8	9.8	4.4	4.8	9.5	5.1
Education	9.7	7.1	2.4	7.3	4.4	4.8	-	4.8
Freedom, Human Rights & Democracy	4.7	-	4.8	2.4	4.4	2.4	11.9	4.8
National Way of Life & Discrimination	5.3	4.8	4.8	2.4	4.4	7.1	7.1	4.8
Market Regulation	3.3	-	2.4	2.4	2.2	4.8	7.1	3.4
Agriculture	1.8	11.9	2.4	-	2.2	2.4	-	3.1
Military and Defence	2.3	-	9.5	4.9	6.7	-	-	3.1
Federalism & Constitution	3.7	4.8	-	-	2.2	4.8	2.4	2.4
Foreign Policy	1.0	-	-	-	2.2	4.8	2.4	1.4
European Union	2.9	-	-	2.4	-	2.4	-	0.7
Foreign Trade Policy	0.9	-	-	-	-	2.4	-	0.7
<b>Total</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>

*Source:* Authors' elaboration of data retrieved from the official website of the Chamber of Deputies.

## Figures

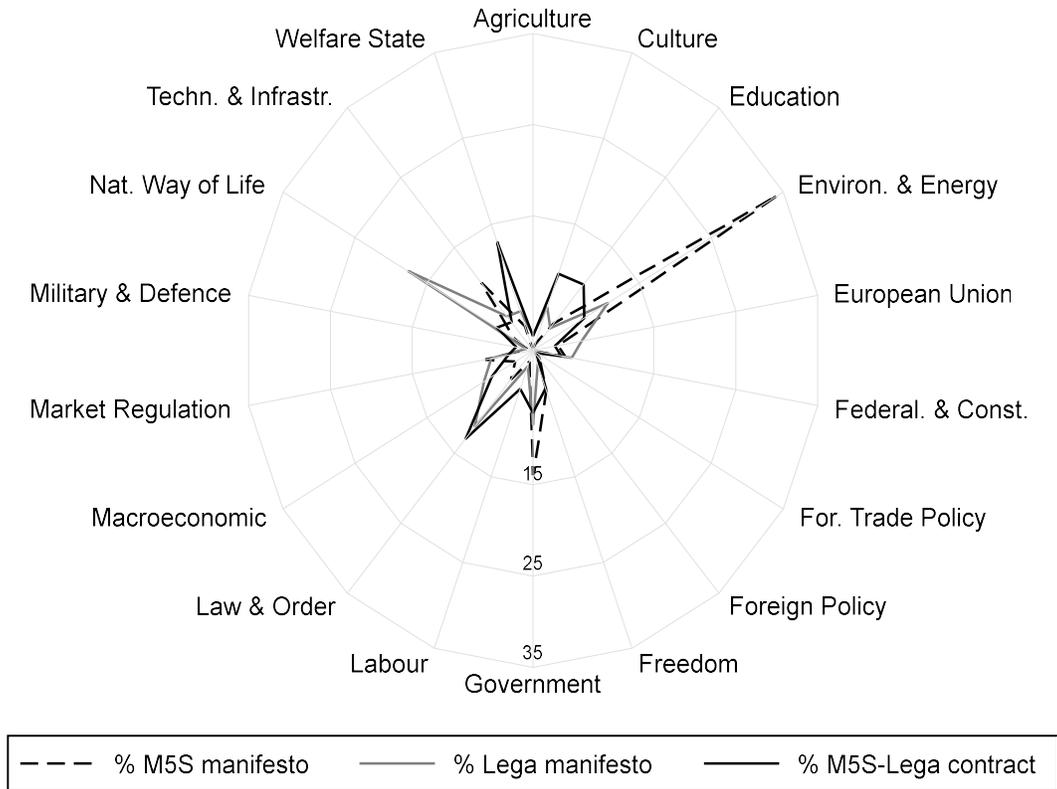
**Figure 1.** Distribution of issue emphasis in the M5S-*Lega* coalition agreement.



*Source:* Authors' elaboration based on the analysis of the contents of the 'Contract for the Government of Change' (M5S & Lega 2018).

*Notes:* Each bar in the graph represents the percentage of quasi-sentences in the coalition agreement that were devoted to the corresponding policy issue (left axis is the reference axis). The dotted line displays the cumulative percentage of quasi-sentences devoted to each policy issue, from the most emphasised one to the least emphasised one (right axis is the reference axis).

**Figure 2.** Distribution of issue emphasis in the M5S and Lega election manifestos and the Government of Change coalition agreement.



*Source:* Authors' elaboration of the content of the 'Contract for the Government of Change' (M5S & Lega 2018), the M5S electoral manifesto (M5S 2018) and the Lega electoral manifesto (Lega 2018).